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## SP489-C-Something Better Than Punishment

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service

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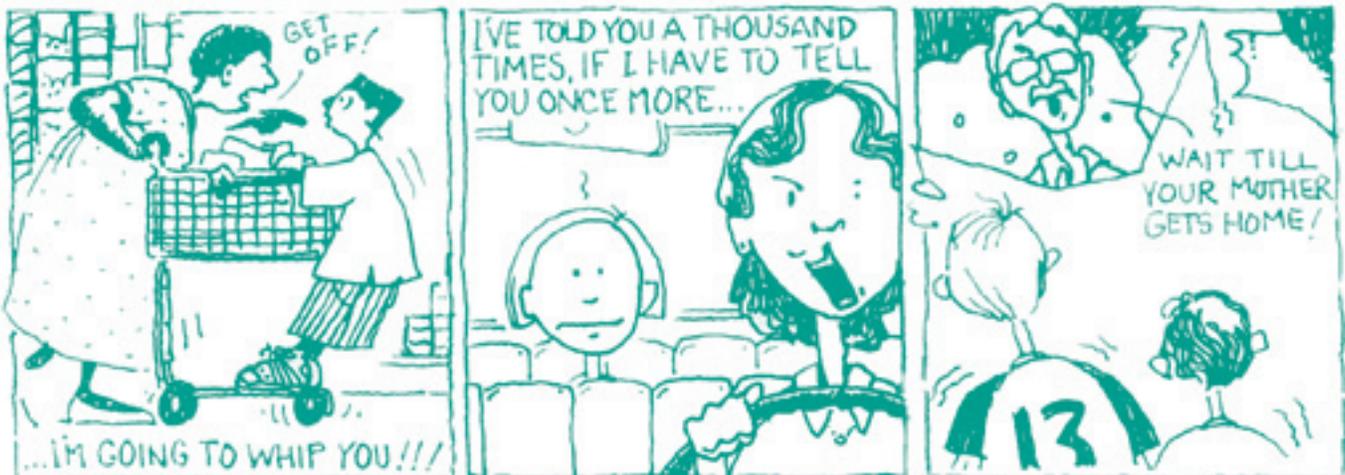
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# PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

## Something Better Than Punishment

**W**hen we think of discipline, we may think of threats and punishment. They may be the most common ways that parents deal with their children's misbehavior.

What is wrong with threats and punishment? One thing that is wrong with them is that they teach children bad things. Can you think of some bad things that are taught to children by the use of threats and punishment?



Consider threats. It is common for parents to get frustrated with their children and yell at them. "If you do that one more time I'm going to whip you, young man!" "I've told you a thousand times. If I have to tell you once more..." Threats are bad because they insult children. They are likely to make the child feel dumb and put-down. The child may feel angry with the parent for treating him that way. Threats are also bad because they may tell children that we yell a lot but we never do anything. Consider the story on the next page.

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A mother was loading her children in the car to go to the store. Just as she got them all in the car, the neighbor came over to talk to her. As the two ladies talked, the children became restless. One of the boys began to climb out the car window. The mother yelled for him to get back in the car.



Then she returned to talking with the neighbor. The boy sat in the window and played. The mother yelled at him to get in the car and threatened to spank him. He sat still while his mother yelled at him, but as soon as she returned to talking, he climbed out the window onto the hood of the car. The mother continued to talk to the neighbor.

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This boy did not think his mother was very serious. She yelled a lot. But she never did anything — unless she became really angry. It's common for parents to be yelling, "Don't touch that!" "Leave her alone." "Go away." Using threats may teach children that parents are unkind and that they don't mean what they say.

There are also problems with punishment. Sometimes parents punish because they are angry. They may spank their children in anger. What does spanking teach a child? For many children, it teaches that the world is a cruel place. It may also teach them that parents are mean. It may teach them that it is all right for big people to hurt little people. Those are not the things we want to teach our children. The most effective parents rarely or never use spanking.

When a parent spanks a child for bad behavior, the parent may think that making the child suffer teaches him or her not to do bad things. What it usually teaches the child is to feel angry or unsafe. Or it may teach the child not to do bad things when the parent is around. But it does not teach the child to be helpful or to have self-control or to feel safe.

There is something better than making children suffer. It is teaching. We want to teach our children that rules are important, that people can work together and solve problems without using physical means.

Teaching is more than talking. It includes how we act. In this publication are some ideas to help you more effectively teach children respect for rules.

You can use these suggestions to find better ways to discipline your children—ways to be sure you are helping, never harming your children. You can help your children develop into strong, caring people you will be proud of.

### **Be careful about the rules you make.**

Sometimes parents make too many rules. For instance, the lady who yelled at her children to stay in the car while she talked to the neighbor might have been wiser to talk to the neighbor later, or to give the children something to do while she talked, or to let the children play for a few minutes on the lawn until she was really ready to go. Those would have been better rules than just asking the children to sit still while she talked.

Another place where parents have trouble is the grocery store. Sometimes parents (and children) are tired and frustrated as they enter the store. Mom may ask her one-year-old to sit in the grocery cart, be quiet, and not touch anything while she shops. Is that reasonable? Or would it be more reasonable to give the child a toy to play with or to talk with the child, or let the child hold purchases that will not get broken as she sits in the cart? The child may enjoy holding the broccoli and talking about it as mother selects other items. An older child may be sent to get the crackers or corn flakes for the family.

Another example: Parents sometimes ask their children to sit quietly with nothing to do in long meetings. That may not be reasonable for a child. Maybe a child could play with a doll or look at a book or draw. Can you think of other things we ask

children to do that may not be reasonable?

If we make rules that are sensitive to the children's needs, it will teach them to respect rules and to see their family's world as a safe place.

Sometimes the best rules are a result of a discussion between the parent and the child. A parent might say to the child: "I am very frustrated that you don't take care of the dishes right after dinner.

What do you suggest?" The parent and child might work on the rule together until they agree. It might be that the child should be allowed to do some chore other than dishes. It may be that their favorite television show comes on right after dinner and they should be allowed to watch television for 30 minutes before doing the dishes.

If you cannot agree on a rule, the parent may have to say, "Let's go by my rule until we can think of a better one."

## Enforce rules consistently.

I remember seeing a mother tell her boy to stop picking at the cake that was on the table. But he kept picking. She kept shouting. He kept picking. She kept shouting...

Maybe the mother should give the boy a piece of cake right away. Or, if the rule is important, it should be enforced.

When parents make rules they don't enforce, children get the idea that we are not serious about rules. The mother might not be wise to leave the cake on the table in view of the hungry child. But if she asks the child to leave the cake alone and he does not, she might move the cake to the cupboard and distract the child with a different activity: "Son, will you help me get out the plates, please?" If the child insists on trying to climb to the cake, then the parent either needs to get him some dinner or take him to his room.

Emily wanted to go to a high school dance. We felt that she was too young. We proposed that she have a party with her friends at our house instead of going to the dance. She thought it was a dumb idea. But she couldn't suggest anything that both she and we felt good about. She had the party at our house. She and her friends had a great time.



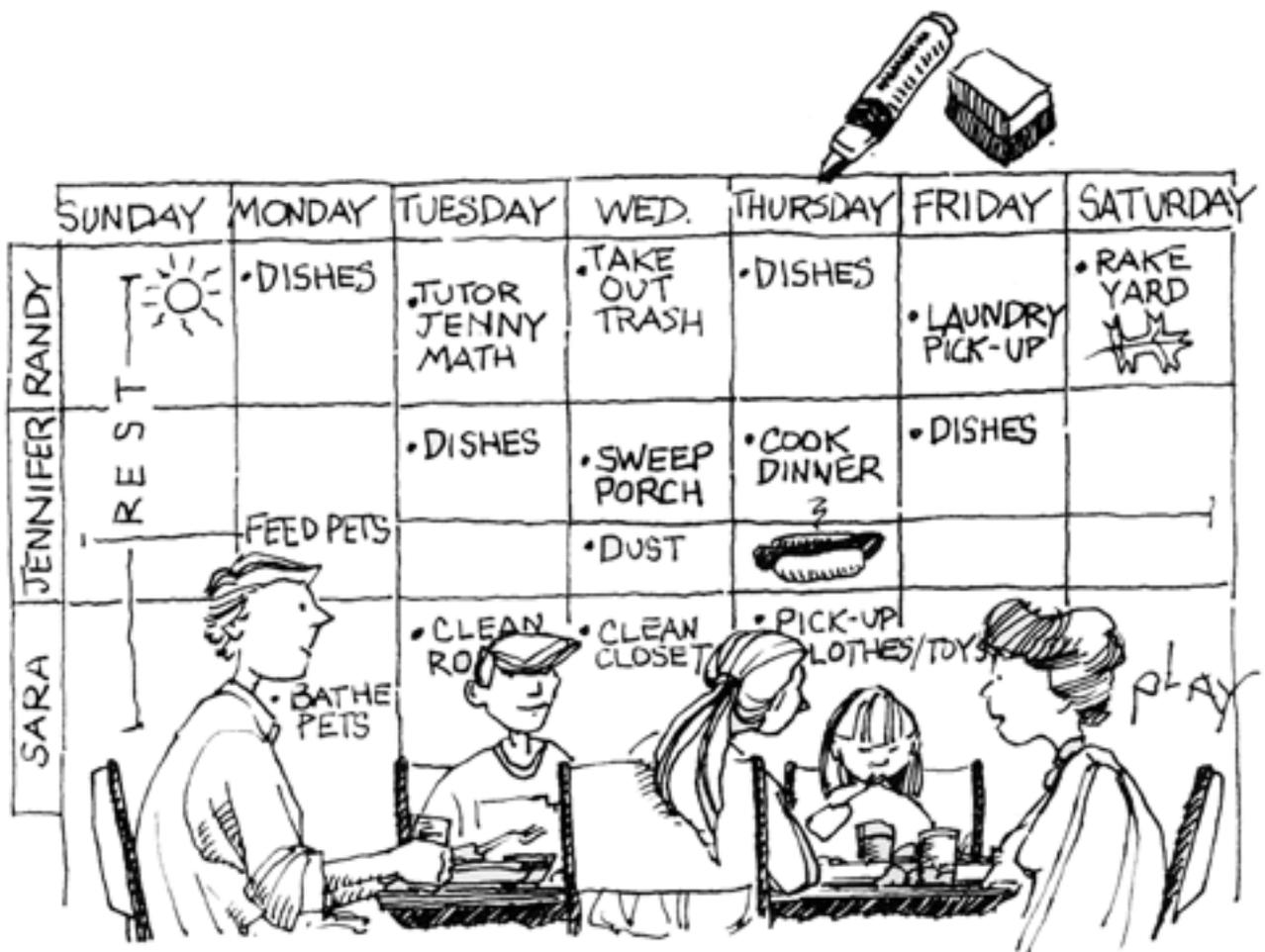
Being consistent in enforcing rules does not mean that the parent cannot adapt to circumstances. We make allowances for tiredness, age, influence of other children, and so on. Consistency means that when we make a rule that we think is reasonable and when a child violates that rule, the child will normally experience the promised result.

One mother found that when she went to the grocery store her children would whine and cry for candy. Sometimes she would give them candy. Sometimes she would get mad. She decided to be more consistent. She made the rule that when she took a child to the grocery store she would get the child a small box of animal cookies to eat while they were in the store, but she would not buy them any candy. She consistently held to the rule. The kids stopped begging for candy.

### Use consequences.

Consequences are different from punishment. Punishment hurts children. It makes them angry. Consequences teach children. They show the child that when she does certain things, certain things will happen.

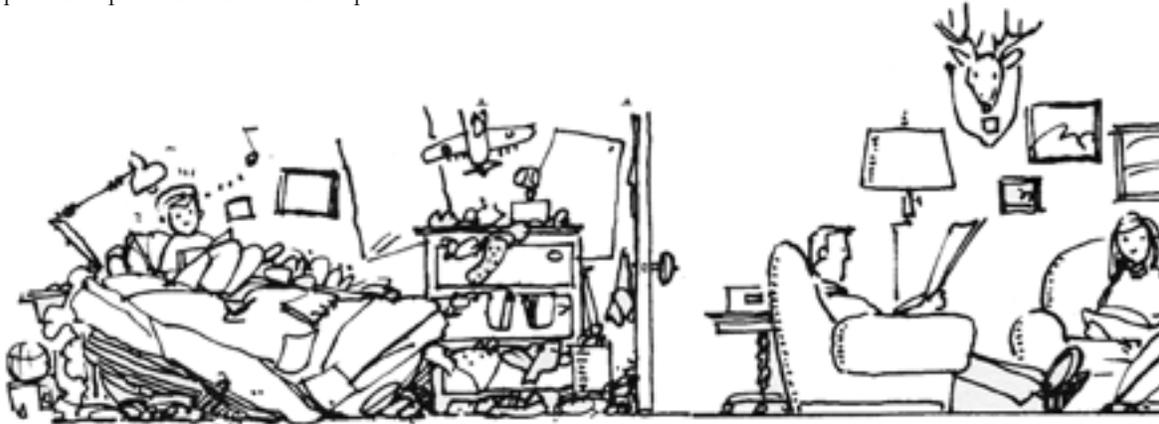
Consequences must not be used when a child is in danger. It is not appropriate to teach children the dangers of a hot stove or of busy traffic by allowing them to touch the stove or wander into traffic. But in many things we allow our children choices.



Each of the children has assigned chores. If the children have not finished their chores by the time we sit down for dinner, they may not join us until the chores are finished. If they start to whine, we ask them to go to their rooms until they can get along with the family.

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We like our children to have clean rooms. Our son likes a messy room. We finally decided that the reasonable consequence for a messy room is for him to live with the mess. We close his door if it drives us crazy. Once in a while we make a special request that he clean it up.

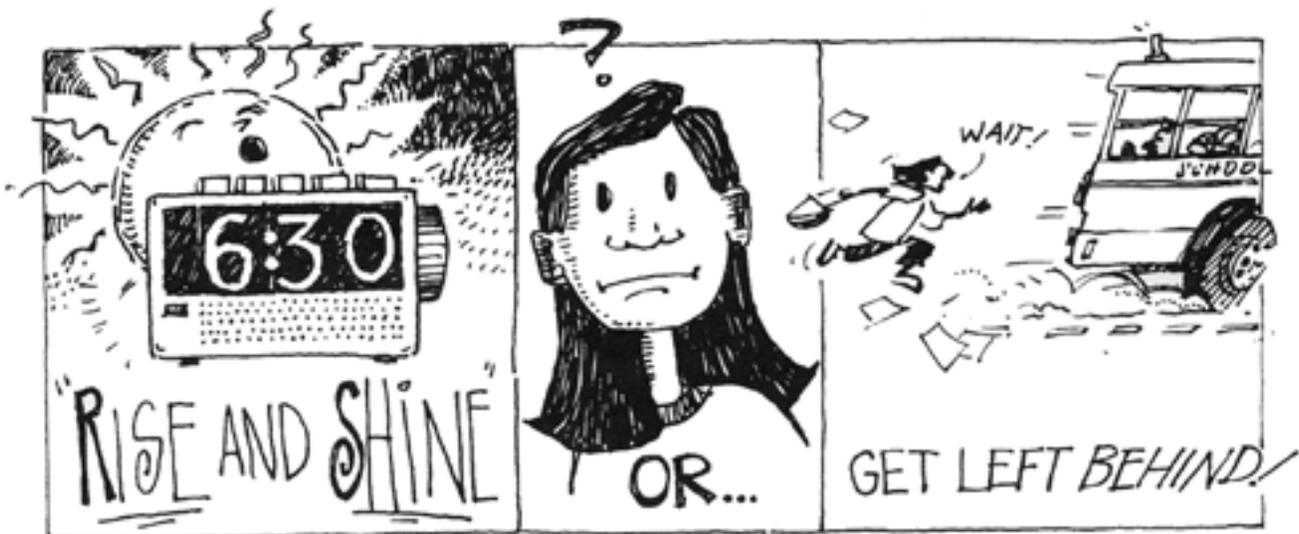


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Using consequences can take a lot of wisdom. The objective is to allow children to see how their choices affect their lives. "Consequences" should not be used to punish.

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Beth had a hard time getting up on time for school. We were always shouting at her and threatening her. Finally, we bought her an alarm clock and told her that if she missed the bus she would be walking to school. She almost immediately became very good at getting herself up on time.



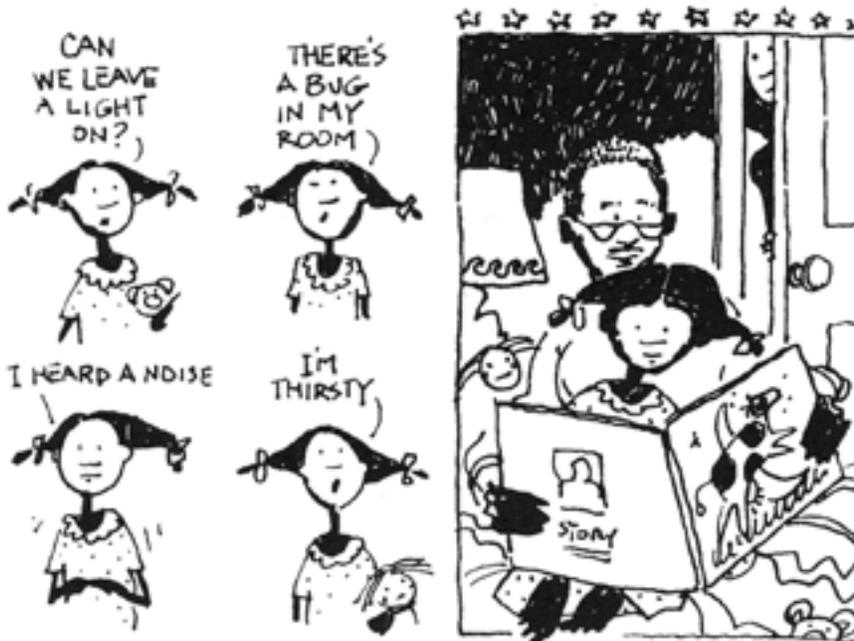
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Learning to use consequences effectively is very difficult. Think of problems you often have with your children. Can you think of appropriate consequences for them that teach them the importance of following the rule? Are the consequences you have chosen a natural and reasonable result of their choices? Do the consequences allow you to avoid nagging and punishing? Learning how to use natural consequences may be one of the most important skills that parents can learn.

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## Give children real choices.

If a child kicks the puppy, we can offer the child a choice: “We don’t kick dogs. Would you like to kick a ball or play with the puppy? Either choice is fine.” Sometimes children resist us because we try to force them to do things. When we do not give them choices, they are more likely to rebel.

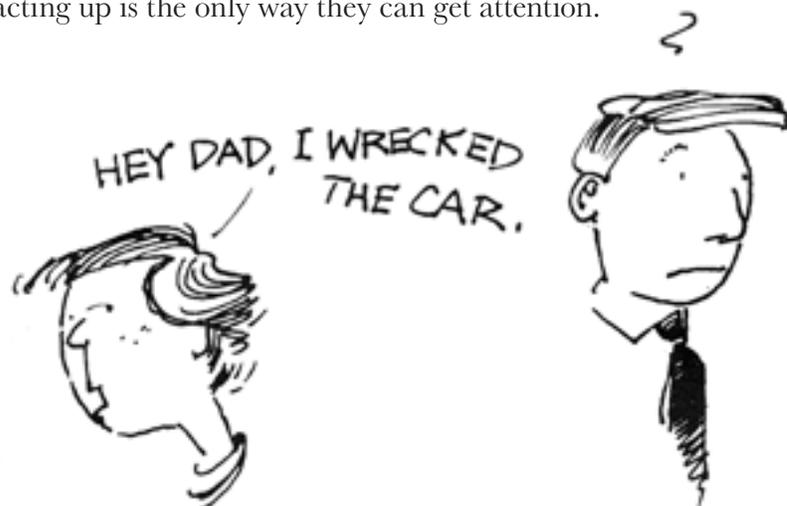


We used to have trouble getting Sara to go to bed. It helped to give her a choice. We asked, “Would you like Daddy to tuck you in or would you like Mommy to tuck you in?” or “Would you like to pick a storybook for me to read to you, or would you like me to pick one?” If she said that she did not want to go to bed, we repeated the same question.

We should give children choices only when we feel that either choice is acceptable. We do not let a small child decide to play with knives or do something dangerous.

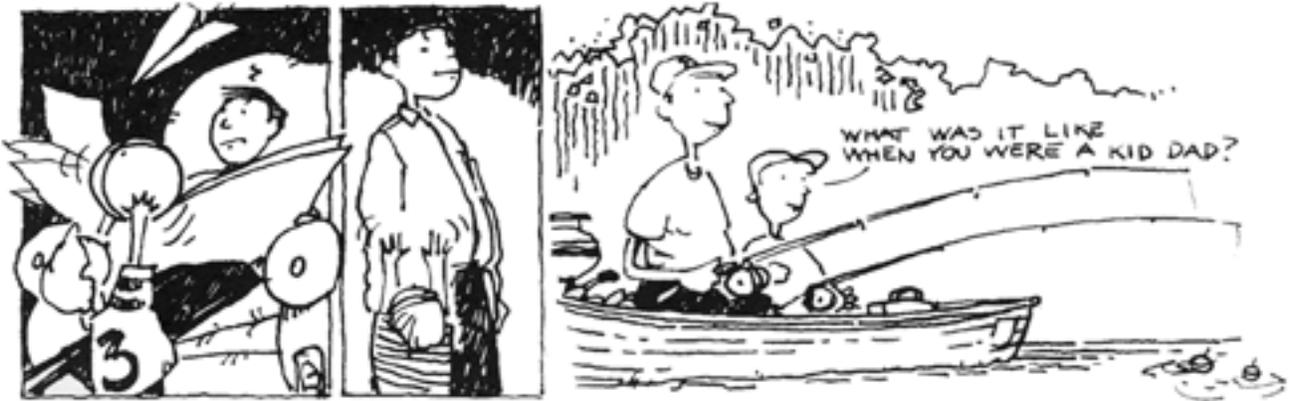
## Keep it positive.

Sometimes children act up because they want us to notice them. They are especially likely to act up for attention if it seems that acting up is the only way they can get attention.



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Tommy was always whining and pulling on his dad's pant leg. The dad would get angry because it seemed that his little boy always wanted his attention. One day he decided to take more time for his son. When his son would pull on his pant leg, he would pick him up and talk to him, take a walk with him, or play a game with him. He found that his son whined far less.



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Sometimes we get so caught up enforcing our rules that we start to use force.



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Gwen could not get Melissa to take her nap. Sometimes she would yell at her or lock her in her room to get her to take a nap. But that only made Melissa angry. Gwen felt bad about the conflict she and her daughter were having about naps. Gwen found that she could read Melissa a story or start her watching a movie on television. Melissa would fall asleep without any battle. Or Gwen could ask her to play quietly on her bed during rest time.

This wise mother learned how to get her daughter to rest without fighting with her. A mother should also be sensitive to the age at which a child no longer needs to take a nap. Distracting a child can also be a very useful way to redirect a child.

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Tommy was playing on the floor with the pans, making a lot of noise. Normally I can stand the noise. But one day it was driving me crazy. Rather than jerk the pans away from him, I got out the play dough, went to the table and started to make things with it. He became interested and left the pans to join me.



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Behavior problems with children can be divided into two groups: the once-in-a-while problem and the frequent problem. Once-in-a-while problems can be dealt with by using the five suggestions in this publication. If your child has a frequent behavior problem that you cannot control with these ideas and seems to get worse in spite of all your efforts, you should talk to a counselor. It is wise to get help before a problem becomes a relationship problem.

To teach our children to behave well, we must work at it. We can learn to make reasonable rules, enforce them consistently, use consequences appropriately, teach children to make good choices, and keep the relationship positive. Because parenting is so challenging we should continue looking for better ideas for handling our children by talking to effective parents and reading about parenting. It is worth all the effort to develop loving relationships with our children while teaching them to become strong, caring adults.

### **If you want to learn more —**

- Faber, Adele, and Mazlish, Elaine (2001). *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ginott, Haim; Ginott, Alice; and Goddard, H. Wallace (2003). *Between Parent and Child: The Best Selling Classic That Revolutionized Parent-Child Communication*. New York: Three Rivers.

*This publication was originally written by H. Wallace Goddard for the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service and has been adapted for use in Tennessee. Contact person for this publication is Denise J. Brandon, Associate Professor, Family & Consumer Sciences, University of Tennessee Extension.*

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